

Sermon for the First Sunday of Lent by Geoffrey Howard, 14th February 2016

At a monthly meeting of clergy and doctors in which I took part the subject one month was bereavement. Our discussion was led by a bereavement counsellor who impressed me very favourably. In answer to the question: *Who are the mourners most difficult to counsel?* she replied, *Those who as children have never heard the word, 'No'. They find it especially difficult when the One upstairs says 'No'.* And she told us of a doctor who after the death of her mother was literally kicking and screaming like a spoiled child who has been refused something.

She also said that we mature through suffering. And that sadness should not be kept at bay by tranquillisers or even by a stiff upper lip. We have to travel through suffering, experience it in all its intensity, in order to grow up.

I want you to bear these two remarks in mind whilst we look at two texts:

Lead us not into temptation, says Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount;

Count it all joy when you fall into temptation. Writes St. James in his Epistle.

Can we resolve this apparent contradiction? Well, let's try.

First we must be clear what the Bible means by *temptation*. We usually take it to mean an incitement to do wrong, to sin, to indulge in behaviour displeasing to God. But the primary meaning in the Bible is that of *testing* a person or thing in order to show what it is really made of.

When David volunteered to fight Goliath, King Saul, we are told, offered the young shepherd his own sword which David politely refused. Instead he relied on his faithful sling because he had tried it, put it to the *test* and found it reliable. The Queen of Sheba hearing of Solomon's fame came to *test* him with hard questions. She was determined to prove for herself whether he was as wise as he was reputed to be. Jesus seeing the hungry multitude said to Philip, *Where are we to buy bread to feed these people?* He said this to prove him, to *test* – the same word as to tempt- the reality of his faith.

The bereavement counsellor said she herself had grown more mature through suffering. But that others, to whom suffering was a strange experience, could behave with great immaturity. This is not to say that suffering is good. We must always pray, *Do not put us to the test: Do not lead us into temptation.* But it is to suggest that even evil may be transformed into a means of good and a source of gratitude.

How does this contribute to our maturity?

First, it shows what we are made of. God already knows, we don't. We *may* think we are stronger than we are, fooling ourselves that we are able to withstand whatever life throws at

us. Or, we may think we are weaker than we are, living in fear of a calamity which, if it comes, to our amazement we meet with fortitude. Either way, self-knowledge is for our good. To be aware of our **weaknesses** is no bad thing. If nothing else it may lead to sympathy for those whom we would otherwise patronise or even despise. To be aware of our **strengths** is no bad thing it may help us to stop worrying about what the future holds.

And we may discover resources we never knew we possessed. I have often been amazed at the strength people discover when they enter the crucible of suffering. A parishioner was dying of cancer and during the whole of her terminal illness up to the moment of her death never complained, she was always cheerful. A non-church-goer, she was pathetically grateful when I told her I had lit a candle for her in the Cathedral. She seemed hardly able to believe that her parish priest thought she was worth lighting a candle for. *You've lit a candle for me?* she said. *Was she always so positive?* I asked her son. *No*, he replied, *just the opposite, if the slightest thing went wrong she was a holy terror.*

Suffering had uncovered hidden treasure.

Most important, those who have come through testing become the means of ministering to others who are themselves being tested. It was written of Jesus: *Since he has passed through the test of suffering, he is able to help those who are suffering now.*

What was true of Jesus is true, in an infinitely smaller way, of each one of us. The hardest day's work I have ever done was to conduct the funeral services, one after the other, of three children who had died in a road accident. The lives of their parents seemed to have perished with them. They will always suffer. But the source of greatest comfort that week was each other. They strengthened one another. And those parents became members of a group of bereaved parents who counsel and comfort others who have lost children. They are able to do this far better than any priest or doctor or social worker. Because they have been there themselves.

Lent is the season we practise saying *No* to ourselves. When we put ourselves, in a modest way, to the test to see what our Christian faith is made of. So that when life – when God – really puts us to the test we may be better prepared to bear it as mature men and women not as children kicking and screaming when they are refused an ice lolly.